

Second chance 54

Chapter 54:

He hated Charla. He wanted to strangle her with his bare hands. But he was a king, and kings were bound by alliances and treaties. He couldn't burn the kingdom to punish one witch — not until he had absolute proof of who he was truly fighting for. He needed to know, without a shadow of a doubt, whether that little girl was his blood.

The air in Amerigo's suite was thick with the smell of old paper and eucalyptus.

Amerigo sat in his wheelchair by the fire, staring into the flames. He didn't turn when Hilliard entered.

"Is the child safe?" Amerigo asked. His voice was raspy, like dry leaves.

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"She is sleeping," Hilliard replied, pouring himself a drink from his grandfather's decanter. "Cailin is guarding her like a wolf. She won't let the nurse near her."

"Good," Amerigo said. "A mother should be a wolf."

He turned his chair. "You saw the video?"

“Yes,” Hilliard said, settling into the leather armchair opposite him. “Charla is unstable.”

“She is a liability,” Amerigo corrected. “But that is not why you are here.”

Hilliard looked into his glass. “The child called her Mother. Twice. In the emergency room. It wasn’t a game. It was terror.”

“And she looks like you,” Amerigo observed. “Before the world hardened you. Before I hardened you.” He paused, letting the fire crackle between them. “Blood calls to blood, son. You don’t need a birthmark to feel the truth in your bones — but you will need proof to claim the heir in the eyes of the world.”

“If she is mine,” Hilliard said, his voice hardening, “that means Cailin lied. About everything. The miscarriage. The last five years.”

“Or she protected them,” Amerigo said.

Hilliard looked up, sharply. “Protected them? From me?”

“From us.” Amerigo gestured slowly around the opulent room. “We are not easy people, son. Look at what we do to our enemies. Look at what we do to each other. Cailin was a soft thing when she came to us. Perhaps she believed we would eat the child alive.”

“Test the girl,” Amerigo commanded, his eyes gleaming in the firelight. “But be discreet. If she is a Holloway, she is the heir. And the heir must be secured.”

“Tonight,” Hilliard promised.

In the Brooklyn safe house, Aron and Davy were still awake. The glow of the monitors was the only light in the loft.

“Algorithm complete,” Aron said, rubbing his tired eyes.

“We need a delivery system,” Davy said, chewing a piece of licorice.

“I’ll route it through the HVAC control unit of the Times Square building,” Aron typed rapidly. “It’s connected to the main server. An IoT vulnerability.”

“When the AC turns on tomorrow at noon,” Davy said, mimicking an explosion with his hands, “boom.”

“For Elia,” they said in unison.

Back at the estate, the house had gone quiet.

Hilliard walked down the hallway to the guest room and eased the door open without a sound.

Inside, Cailin was asleep in the chair beside Elia's bed. Her head rested against the mattress, her hand wrapped around Elia's small fingers.

Hilliard stood in the doorway and watched them. His eyes moved to the bandage on Cailin's arm — the injury she had taken to shield the child.

He felt a pull in his chest. A deep, aching gravity that he had no name for.